

## **A (Somewhat) Brief History of Monona Terrace, A Public Place by Frank Lloyd Wright**

On July 18, 1997, Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center opened its doors after nearly 60 years of controversy. First proposed in 1938, the lakefront facility is a testament to the genius of Frank Lloyd Wright and the controversy both he and his design created. Of his plans, Wright said the building would be “the long awaited wedding between the city and beautiful Lake Monona.” It was a long wait.

By 1938, Wright’s reputation soared with the success and positive publicity that surrounded Fallingwater, Johnson Wax and the Usonian houses. Featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, the author praised the architect and said that he had rebounded from setbacks to become the “greatest architect of the twentieth century.” Despite his international acclaim, however, he had not yet been celebrated in his own hometown with a large public commission. It is within this context that Wright approached the City of Madison to build Monona Terrace. The project intended to fulfill the City’s need for an auditorium, armory, boat harbor, train station and city-county building. Wright envisioned the space to be an inspirational lake-view locale where great minds would gather to recreate and discuss the issues of the day. The city and county did not approve a joint office building project in 1938, so Wright’s plans were not required.

Another opportunity to build Monona Terrace arose in 1952 when the City decided to move forward with an auditorium. Wright altered his earlier plans and presented them to the city council and public forums. A referendum passed and Wright was voted as the architect. But the vote was close, and Wright’s arrogance and extravagant lifestyle earned him several enemies. In 1957, the Terrace project suffered a tremendous setback when one member of the Wisconsin assembly leader introduced a bill prohibiting any building construction on the lakefront higher than 20 feet. The bill passed, though it was later repealed in March 1959.

In April 1959, twenty-one years and eight designs after the original proposal, Frank Lloyd Wright died. In the process he devoted countless hours preparing drawings, renderings, and models, while simultaneously trying to convince the City that the project had merit. The proposal created a heated controversy resulting in five referenda, ten lawsuits, ten pieces of state legislation, and over four thousand newspaper articles. The fact that Wright returned repeatedly to a project for which he was paid a meager \$250 attests to his commitment to the Terrace project.

Throughout the next few decades, the City considered multiple plans and debated what would best fulfill the interests of the City, County and State. The interior spaces were repeatedly reconfigured to fulfill the City’s immediate goals.

In the 1990s, as Wright’s plans were revisited again, Taliesin architect Tony Putnam was hired to work with the City planning committee. The resulting structure was built on the same site, and still has the lecture hall, community center, meeting rooms, exhibition hall and rooftop garden Wright proposed in the 1950s. However, it now fulfills the City’s need for a convention center to serve as an economic catalyst for the downtown area, to be a community center, and tourism destination.

The design of Monona Terrace centers on the circular form. The dramatic cylindrical parking ramps that flank the east and west ends of the building reflect the circular forms with which Wright was experimenting. And the connecting spaces, both internal and external flow continuously in a curvilinear form that is echoed in the buildings decorative details including lighting fixtures, carpeting, furnishings and signage.

Completed in 1997 at the cost of \$67.1 million, the building and its utilization have exceeded expectations as Madison residents and visitors have attended meetings, banquets, concerts, conventions and myriad other community events. Wright's beloved hometown finally celebrated its local architect by building his working piece of art.

[Click here to go to an interactive pictorial time line about Frank Lloyd Wright's relationship to Monona Terrace.](#)